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ABSTRACT

This guide helps leaders working with parents and the community learn about promising practices in parent and community involvement in school reform. By examining the efforts of seven contrasting groups working with parents nationwide, the guide depicts the many forms that parent and community involvement in schools can take, highlighting opportunities for and barriers to meaningful parent participation. It is designed to help leaders consider how these seven groups might offer support or technical assistance in their own work to engage parents and communities in schools and school reform. The guide begins with organizational profiles of the seven groups (mission, overall work, work with parents and communities, and technical assistance available). The next section discusses the profiles, noting lessons learned and barriers to participation. The next section examines the types of guidance and assistance the seven groups may be able to provide to people just starting out, offering two tools for identifying the technical assistance provider that best meets their needs (a technical assistance chart and a chart of important questions to consider before seeking technical assistance). The guide ends with a list of contact information for the seven groups and a glossary of relevant terms. (SM)

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STRONG IMAGES AND PRACTICAL IDEAS:

A Guide To Parent Engagement in School Reform

Prepared by Research for Action
Written by Rochelle Nichols Solomon and Amy Rhodes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Recognizing that strong families and strong neighborhoods are interdependent, the Casey Foundation is supporting broad strategies for neighborhood development and family transformation in twenty-two urban communities around the nation through its Making Connections initiative.

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Strong Schools, Strong Communities: Building Parent and Community Support for Schools and School Reform

This guide is about the parent *engagement*[1] efforts of seven initiatives across the country: The Achievement Council, Alliance Schools Initiative, Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, The Education Trust, Institute for Education and Social Policy, and the School Design and Development Center. The underlying assumption of the work of these seven efforts is that strong schools are vital to strong communities. Strong schools can mean academic success and new opportunities for children, they can make a neighborhood a more desirable place to live for all residents, and they can also be a source of support and common ground for parents and community members working to improve a neighborhood. Strong communities are also vital to strong schools. Strong communities take care of their schools, they support the activity that occurs within their walls, and they can also ask the hard questions of schools that push them to get better. The relationship between strong schools and strong communities is truly dynamic. As community members work to improve schools, they gain new skills and confidence in their abilities to improve their neighborhoods. They also establish new relationships with each other, with teachers and administrators, and with the schools themselves. These changes, in turn, lead to stronger communities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation commissioned this Resource Guide to give leaders of the 22 Making Connections cities (and others working with parents and communities) strong images and practical ideas about the forms that parent involvement in school reform can take. The seven organizations described in this Resource Guide were selected by the Annie E. Casey Foundation because they have been or are currently funded by the Foundation. The Foundation hopes that resource guides such as this one will allow opportunities for grantees to share what they have learned with other grantees in the 22 Making Connections cities.

It is nearly universally accepted that involving parents is an important aspect of any good school and any attempt to improve schools.[2] But what does parent involvement in schools really mean? Discussions of parent involvement can include a wide range of definitions. Traditionally, parent involvement has been defined as parents' responsibility for supporting their children's education by making sure that their children are attending school, arriving ready to learn, and receiving help with their homework. Sometimes, it has called for the more active participation of parents, encouraging them to participate in school events such as parent-teacher conferences or home and school associations. These roles continue traditional relationships in schools in which teachers and administrators take the lead in educational and other school matters, with parents playing a supportive, secondary role.

While these ways of involving parents are essential to students' success in schools, there are also other, less traditional roles that parents can play in schools. In these roles, parents work as partners with teachers and administrators, claiming an equal say in what happens in schools and classrooms. This might include involving parents as partners in decisions about their school's budget, curriculum and other critical matters. It could also consist of parents lobbying for policy changes at the local, state, or national levels, or using existing policies to evaluate the quality of their own schools. Policy initiatives such as the implementation of *standards* (expectations of what students should learn

[1] *Words highlighted in orange throughout the Resource Guide are defined in the Glossary (p. 43).*

[2] *Throughout this Resource Guide, we use the word "parent" to refer to biological parents, foster parents, guardians, grandparents, and any other responsible adult caring for children.*

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in school) can give parents tools to hold schools accountable for their children's learning. In these non-traditional roles, parents are working not only for their own children, but for the well-being of all children. These roles involve parents in school *reform*, rather than just in schools.

Involving parents in these new ways requires deep changes in the relationships between educators and parents. It often challenges traditional educator-parent roles that are deeply ingrained in the culture of schools and school systems. This is undoubtedly a complex endeavor. Ideally, educators and parents begin to share educational leadership roles as they work collaboratively for change. The idea of parents as education leaders is often new and uncomfortable for people in schools. Involving parents as partners in reform takes patience and an understanding of the complexity of schools and school systems. Of course, this is not an either-or proposition. Parents often play overlapping roles, mixing traditional roles with the non-traditional and finding middle ground that is comfortable for both educators and parents.

While the seven groups described in this Guide illustrate a range of ways to involve parents in reform, they are also working from similar assumptions about what it means to involve parents in schools. All of the groups aim to involve parents collectively rather than individually. They work to connect parents and community members to each other and, in turn, to schools in order to improve schools. When these parents unite, they begin to work for all children in a school or community, rather than just their own children. These groups, then, are working to involve parents in schools with the goal of reforming schools and, sometimes, school systems. Working from these assumptions has produced proven models and promising practices of parent and community involvement in school reform. The examples of these seven groups also clearly demonstrate the challenges encountered when any group attempts to include parents in meaningful roles in school reform.

Despite the similarities in these groups' approaches to reform, they represent different levels of activism and different points of entry for involving parents in reform. Six of the seven groups are working to involve parents in public schools: The Achievement Council, Alliance Schools Initiative, Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, The Education Trust, and the Institute for Education and Social Policy. The remaining group, the School Design and Development Center, works to involve parents in private schools that have emerged from school voucher legislation. Among the groups working in public schools there also exists a great deal of variation in their approaches to parent involvement. Among their methods are: using community organizing techniques to help parents identify issues in their local schools; educating parents about policy changes that impact their children's school life; training and supporting parents as leaders within their local schools; and providing parents with the *data* they need to ask good questions about what's happening in their schools and school systems.

The diversity of these groups offers the clear message that there is no single way to involve parents in reforming schools. The approach that any organization or group of parents chooses will depend on their local context and capacity. Simply put, what works in one neighborhood will not necessarily work in another. Later in the Guide, we will offer some questions that you can ask about your local context as you begin to consider how best to bring parents into schools and school reform.

Welcome!

This Resource Guide is designed to help you, leaders in Making Connections cities and others working with parents and community, learn about promising practices in parent and community involvement in school *reform* and also, just as importantly, to help you reflect on what this work could look like in your local context. By examining the efforts of seven contrasting groups working with parents across the country, the Resource Guide depicts the variety of forms that parent and community involvement in schools can take, highlighting the opportunities for and barriers to meaningful parent involvement in schools. It is also designed to help you consider how these seven groups can offer you support, or technical assistance, in your own work to engage parents and communities in schools and school reform.

We hope that this Guide will serve as a conversation-starter, a workbook, and a reference. We encourage you to mark up the margins, use the note pages in the back, and make copies of pages to generate discussions at meetings or with individual colleagues. While the Resource Guide will be the most comprehensive if read from beginning to end, we have written it so that you could read and use each part independently of the others. Feel free to skip around, find what catches your eye, and then return for a more complete read. The variety and complexity of the work carried out by the seven groups makes it clear that meaningful parent involvement in schools and school reform requires careful thought and well-informed discussion. We hope that this Guide will inspire and support you in this undertaking.

Getting Started

We begin the Resource Guide with **Organizational Profiles** (pp.5-27) for each of the seven groups. These profiles give information about each group's mission and overall work, as well as strong images of their work with parents and communities. Through stories and examples, we describe how each group approaches its work of involving parents and communities in schools and school reform. We also give a brief description of the technical assistance the group might be able to offer you. The Technical Assistance section later in the Guide talks about this in more depth.

A discussion of the profiles follows, in **Lessons Learned about Parent Engagement** (pp.28-33). This section offers concrete lessons about *Opportunities for Engaging Parents in School Life and School Reform* (pp.29-31) as well as *Barriers that Shut Parents Out of School Life and School Reform* (pp.32-33). Through these lessons, we hope to convey practical ideas about the openings and handles that can be used to involve parents in schools, while also warning you of the obstacles you can expect to encounter and giving examples of how other groups have overcome them.

In the following section, we turn to a discussion of the guidance and assistance the seven groups can offer you as you begin or expand the challenging work of involving parents in school reform. This section, **Technical Assistance: Helping Parents Sit at the Table** (pp.34-41), describes the kinds of supports that these groups provide and what this support can (and cannot) help you do. It also includes two tools designed to help you identify the technical assistance

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provider that best meets your needs. First, a **Technical Assistance Chart** (p.38) lays out the type of supports the groups can offer you. Following the chart is **Taking Stock: Important Questions to Consider Before Seeking Technical Assistance** (pp.39-41), which presents key questions that you must ask about your local context as well as your group in order to find the right technical assistance provider.

At the very end of the Guide you will find a more detailed list of **Contact Information** (p.42) for the seven groups, as well as a **Glossary** (p.43) of highlighted terms from throughout the Resource Guide.

YOU MAY WANT TO START READING THE GUIDE BY LOOKING AT THE KEY PHRASES AND WORDS PRESENTED IN THE GLOSSARY (P.43), IN ORDER TO BETTER UNDERSTAND SOME OF THE CENTRAL IDEAS GUIDING EFFORTS TO INVOLVE PARENTS IN SCHOOL REFORM.

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Introduction

This section describes each organization's work with parents in greater depth. Looking at the seven groups side-by-side illustrates a range of approaches to involving parents in schools and school *reform*. Some of the organizations emerged in the context of local or state school reform initiatives, while others were formed to address education issues on a national scale. For some of the organizations, working with parents is a major part of their overall mission, whereas for others it represents a small part of their overall work.

We developed the profiles in this section through in-depth phone interviews with key staff members, reviews of organizational and related documents, follow-up phone interviews, and site visits to organizations with which we were less familiar.

We hope the strong images of these organizations will provide you with models and inspiration. While reading them, you may also want to consider which approaches seem particularly relevant to your own situation, and think about how some of the profiled organizations might guide and assist you in your work.

Organizations at a Glance

The Achievement Council, in Los Angeles, collaborates with schools and community groups, especially in the Los Angeles area, to improve the capacity of urban school districts to ensure that all students learn at the highest levels.

Alliance Schools Initiative, in Texas, uses school and community organizing in its efforts to bring about significant improvement in public education. It is a project of the Interfaith Education Fund.

Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, in Kentucky, trains parents to become parent leaders in their schools in order to help improve student achievement and support a statewide education reform agenda. It is a project of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, based in Chicago with local branches in nine cities, is a national network of urban parents, educators, community leaders, and researchers working together to improve public schools.

The Education Trust, in Washington D.C., is a policy organization that works with educators, parents and community members in addition to policymakers in its efforts to close the achievement gap.

Institute for Education and Social Policy, in New York City, works to strengthen public education, particularly in low-income communities of color, through research and support for community organizing.

School Design and Development Center, in Milwaukee, works with individuals and groups to provide comprehensive services for designing and developing charter and private schools for low-income students.

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What You Will Find in Every Profile

A box that contains general background information about the organization, including:

- *Its mission, paraphrased or quoted from the organization's brochures or web-site*
- *A brief history of the organization*
- *A description of its primary activities*
- *In cases where the featured program is part of a larger organization, we also give background on the parent organization.*

Information about the organization's work with parents and community members, including a description of:

- *Goals*
- *The nature of their involvement with parents*
- *Assumptions which guide their work with parents*
- *Kinds of technical assistance the organization can provide.*

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The Achievement Council
(Los Angeles, California)

The Achievement Council was established in 1983 as a public interest organization whose mission is to examine and respond to the systemic challenges that have led to low academic outcomes for urban and low-income students, and to build the capacity of districts, schools and communities to ensure that all students are academically prepared to succeed at the highest levels, including graduation from a four-year college. From 1996 to 1999 the Achievement Council, in partnership with seven other California groups, maintained the Community-School Initiative (CSI), a collaboration focused on improving educational outcomes in public schools in the Watts community of Los Angeles through strong parent, student and community engagement.

Background:

- The Achievement Council works to improve public education, particularly in the Los Angeles Unified School District.
- The organization works directly with schools, providing professional development and supports to teachers and administrators, while also working with system-wide administrators to change state and national policy, and with community organizations to advocate for equity-focused school reform.
- Number of staff in CSI: 1 (1996-1999)
- Percentage of The Achievement Council's annual budget dedicated to parent/community involvement: 10% (1996-1999)

The Achievement Council's major activities include:

Functioning as an advocacy organization with four major areas of work:

1. Changing state and national policy, with the goal of remedying inequities in educational access and resources for low-income and minority students.
2. Fostering a school culture that supports academics through the implementation of standards and leadership development.
3. Improving teacher quality.
4. Improving instructional leadership through building the capacity of administrators.

Promoting the use of disaggregated student achievement and other school data to identify necessary changes, plan actions, and monitor progress toward access and equity.

Working collaboratively with local and national organizations engaged in similar efforts.

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What was The Achievement Council's goal in working with parents?

Dividing the "haves" and the "have-nots" denies all students the experience of full participation in a community of learners that mirrors the real world.

Achievement Council Staff

Alarmed about the inadequacies of California's schools that serve students of color and low-income students, educational policy leaders established The Achievement Council to advocate for educational *equity*. The Community-School Initiative, a project of The Achievement Council which ended in 1999, sought to improve schools by helping to increase opportunities for parents and students of color, immigrant, low-income and language minority groups to become actively engaged in school *reform*. Strong partnerships with teachers and other community members were promoted with the goal of creating a shared vision and commitment to implementing reforms for their schools and school systems.

What did The Achievement Council's work with parents look like?

The Achievement Council and other CSI partners worked directly with grassroots organizations in South Central Los Angeles. Through a series of on-going monthly meetings, parents, students and others examined disaggregated *data*, identified concerns about their schools, and explored strategies for improvements. In support of this effort, the Achievement Council developed tools for the use of data and trained parents to use data to identify equity issues in their schools. The staff contributed to *The Schools We Need Now*, published by California Tomorrow (a CSI partner), which provided a historical context for parent *engagement* in education, case studies on school restructuring, and an outline of major equity issues.

Much of the activity of the Community-School Initiative focused on helping parents to examine policy at the school and district levels. Parents conducted their own action research, developed data, and met with high-level school administrators. The Achievement Council describes these parent-led actions as "giving legs" to their policy work.

What assumptions guided The Achievement Council's work with parents?

The Community-School Initiative was based on the beliefs that:

Parents have a central role to play in school change.

All partners should be valued for their unique expertise and the relationships they bring to the effort.

A focus on schools can contribute to improved community life, and vice versa, particularly during times of major change in the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods.

Data must be central to the project, and must be used as a tool for planning as well as monitoring results.

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What does The Achievement Council offer that might be useful to you?

Although the Achievement Council is no longer involved in the Community-School Initiative, the organization does have eighteen years of experience supporting education reform in California. The organization has developed a range of expertise and can share their experience in using data, examining equity issues, providing professional development for teachers and administrators and helping build the capacity of parents, students and community members for meaningful collaboration with educators. Most of the support the group can currently offer is informal, involving telephone consultations on such activities as: use of data; understanding different models of professional development for teachers; conducting school quality reviews; and creating school-college partnerships. The group can also share written materials, including publications and reports they have produced over many years. The Achievement Council also has an extensive understanding of public education in California in general, and the Los Angeles Unified School District in particular, and can provide guidance on site visits to exemplary schools within the District.

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Alliance Schools Initiative

A Project of the Interfaith Education Fund (Texas)

The Alliance Schools Initiative was established in 1991 with the goal of significantly improving public education through community and school organizing. The effort is a major project of the Interfaith Education Fund (IEF), which is the research and resource arm of the Southwest Texas Industrial Areas Foundation Network (IAF), a national organizing network founded in the 1940s, comprised of multi-ethnic, interfaith organizations and other institutions.

Background:

- The Alliance Schools Initiative emerged from the organizing of congregations and neighborhoods by IAF affiliates in Southwest Texas.
- The Alliance Schools are dues-paying members of the IAF network of organizations. They are public schools serving mostly low-income Hispanic and African American students. In order for a school to join the Alliance, the principal must give approval and the school must accept a set of principles and practices related to parent and community involvement.
- The number of Alliance Schools has grown from 21 in the early 1990s to approximately 120 in 2001, with another 40-50 schools in the process of becoming network members.
- An organizing campaign by IAF and the Alliance Schools led to the establishment of a state-sponsored Capital Investment Fund, a multimillion-dollar program of competitively awarded grants which support innovations in schools that meet parent engagement criteria.
- Total staff organizing at Alliance Schools: 22
- Percentage of IEF's annual budget dedicated to reorganizing* schools: 30%

The Alliance Schools Initiative's major activities include:

Bringing parents and education leaders together to work on improving schools.

Providing enriching learning opportunities for adults through leadership training, and for students through a variety of classroom and school-based programs.

Building strong connections between schools and community.

Building a constituency in support of educational excellence.

Providing research on community engagement and educational practices and experiences.

Reorganizing schools refers to organizing that supports school reform through significant collaborations between parents and educators. IAF training that helps parents and educators learn to identify self-interest, negotiate, and resolve conflict is an integral part of this work.

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What is Alliance Schools' goal in working with parents?

When I first got involved with this work the organizer would refer to me as a leader—I didn't like that, I thought I'm not a leader. Now I see myself as a stakeholder holding my school and myself accountable—now I think of myself as a leader.

Parent Leader

The Alliance Schools Initiative aims to significantly improve public education by developing strong parent and educator leaders capable of working together to reorganize their schools. Alliance leaders impact policy at the school, local and state level. They also bring new educational practices to classrooms and schools, and supports for students that allow them to benefit from these improvements.

Alliance Schools are part of a larger Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) community organizing effort designed to create a shared vision, commitment and *accountability* for community life, particularly in low-income and minority communities.

What does Alliance Schools' work with parents look like?

In 1987 when the principal of one Fort Worth, Texas middle school turned to the IAF for help, she didn't have a specific project in mind. She certainly did not come with proposals to create the Alliance Schools Initiative, involve more parents in her school, or train teachers. Instead, in line with the Alliance Schools emphasis on the importance of relationships, the conversation began with a discussion about who she was, what worried her, and her hopes and aspirations for the students in her school. She brought up her concerns about her school's dismal test scores and attendance, violent atmosphere, and almost complete lack of parent and community presence in the school. However, from these conversations evolved a plan for the Alliance Schools Initiative, a school organizing effort that sees parents as engaged citizens and agents of change, rather than as passive consumers of public education.

A senior staff member of the IAF describes the work of the Alliance Schools as "helping thousands of ordinary people learn how to define their own interests and act collectively for the common good." Alliance Schools organizers work with parents and others, helping them to learn new ways of exchanging ideas and acting together. They provide on-going opportunities for interactions and learning using different forums and methods of outreach—from door-by-door neighborhood walks conducted by parents and teachers to learn what other parents and neighbors think about schools, to large public meetings in which parent leaders dialogue with public officials about the direction of public education. Alliance Schools parents and educators conduct research, organize site visits, hold actions and trainings, and negotiate at the school, district and state levels to obtain the resources they need.

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WHAT ARE THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT GUIDE ALLIANCE SCHOOLS' WORK WITH PARENTS?

We believe in power before program.

IAF Organizer

IAF and the Alliance Schools leaders and organizers believe that power comes from organized people with the capacity to find shared interests and act on them together. Ideas underscoring this belief include:

Parents can be change agents working to transform or reorganize schools so they work for students and community.

School staff should partner with parents to improve not only schools, but the broader community.

In Alliance Schools, conversations that involve a mutual exchange of ideas, with deliberation and compromise, help establish new kinds of relationships between parents and educators. Alliance Schools create the space for ongoing conversations through a number of strategies.

Relationships provide the glue for an organized constituency made up of parents, community members and educators who can improve, champion, and protect public education. These relationships include connections between institutions like schools, congregations, unions and other groups.

Improved schools benefit all members of a community—not just parents.

WHAT DOES ALLIANCE SCHOOLS OFFER THAT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO YOU?

One form of technical assistance the organization provides is hosting site visits to Alliance Schools and communities. The organization also has a wealth of research reports, concept papers, and other readings describing the Alliance Schools initiative and its organizing practices. The IAF and Alliance Schools story has been included in a number of books about American society and culture, such as *Interwoven Destinies*, *Back to Shared Prosperity: The Growing Inequality of Wealth & Income in America*, *Who Will Tell The People*, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, and *Community Is Possible.*[4]

[4] Boyte, H.C. (1984). *Community is possible: Repairing America's roots*. New York: Harper & Row; Cisneros, H.G., ed. (1993). *Interwoven destines: cities and the nation*. New York: Norton; Greider, W. (1992). *Who will tell the people: The betrayal of American democracy*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Marshall, R., ed. (2000). *Back to shared prosperity: The growing inequality of wealth and income in America*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe; Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE FOR PARENT LEADERSHIP

A PROJECT OF THE PRICHARD COMMITTEE
FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE
(KENTUCKY)

The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (Commonwealth Institute), created in 1997, provides training for parents in order to improve student achievement through the development of parent leaders and strong parent involvement in Kentucky public schools. The Commonwealth Institute is a component of the Prichard Committee, a statewide organization founded in 1990 to improve all forms of public education in Kentucky.

BACKGROUND:

- In 1990, the Kentucky legislature passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), mandating an ambitious standards-driven reform agenda for public education in Kentucky. At that time, the Prichard Committee was formed to serve as a watchdog and advocate for the implementation of KERA.
- The Commonwealth Institute was developed to foster parent leadership, one of the strategies identified to support KERA's implementation.
- Commonwealth Institute participants are selected from all parts of the state, representing urban, rural and suburban public school districts.
- Number of staff working on the Commonwealth Institute: 20
- Percent of Prichard's annual budget dedicated to parent involvement: 80%

THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE'S MAJOR ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

Providing intensive leadership training aimed at helping parents understand state education laws and mandates and translate them into action.

Promoting the design and implementation of school-based activities focused on increasing parent involvement and student achievement.

Providing mentors to work with parents.

Supporting the use of data to identify changes needed in public education, develop strategies for change, and monitor progress.

Providing dedicated funding for parent-led projects.

Creating regional and statewide networks of informed parents.

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What is the Commonwealth Institute's goal in working with parents?

The Commonwealth Institute is designed to make parents of children in public schools more powerful as they become effective advocates for improved education and higher achievement for all students.

From Program Brochure

The Commonwealth Institute (commonly referred to as CIPL) was established to accelerate the implementation of the school *reform* agenda *mandated* by the Kentucky Education Reform Act, with a focus on the individual school level. The Institute helps parents be the drivers of changes in their schools by supporting their awareness and understanding of key reform strategies, helping them develop and implement school-based projects to support student achievement, and encouraging relationships among parents through regional networks of parents who have participated in the Institute.

What does the Commonwealth Institute's work with parents look like?

It was announced at a recent school meeting that 40-50 percent of incoming freshmen couldn't read well enough to survive the high school curriculum. And one teacher said he didn't have time to stop and work with those who were behind. At that comment my hand shot up. I never would have done that before CIPL. I asked if they ever thought of parent volunteers to work with them.

Commonwealth Institute Graduate

Each year the Commonwealth Institute selects two hundred parents to participate in a year-long leadership development experience. Participants attend intensive six-day residential training (three two-day sessions over a four month period) held in seven locations around the state. To date, more than 700 parents have participated in the Institute. This represents a growing cadre of more confident parents, armed with a greater understanding of the reform agenda, who recognize the intricacies of policy at both local and state levels and who can demand and support change.

Graduates of the Commonwealth Institute, known as Fellows, design and implement a range of school-based projects aimed at increasing student achievement and parent participation in school life. For example, one Fellow researched and published a parent handbook to help parents understand the content and skills required by KERA and "what their kids are suposed to be learning in each grade." Another Fellow focused on successful strategies of outreach to uninvolved parents. The work included creating and conducting workshops to help parents "step outside their safe zone" and become sensitive to other parents. Still another Commonwealth Institute graduate organized structured parent-teacher conversations to improve the quality of interactions, build trust, and increase the capacity for working together. These projects demonstrate some of the roles parents can play in reform and successful strategies for increasing parent involvement. In addition, the Institute's work has resulted in a network of new relationships formed through parents' participation in the training, outreach to other parents following the training, and enhanced relationships with teachers and principals in schools selected for the implementation of Commonwealth Institute projects.

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What assumptions guide the Commonwealth Institute's work with parents?

The decision by the Prichard Committee (parent organization of the Commonwealth Institute) to support the deep involvement of parents as leaders in education *reform* evolved out of seven years of school reform work in Kentucky. While KERA has been successful in improving education across the state, the ambitious vision of equitable and excellent education for all Kentucky's children requires an even greater impact on school-level practices and policies. The Prichard Committee sees parents as possible natural allies for this work and believes:

Parents are capable of advocating not only for their children, but for all children.

More open and trusting relationships between parents and teachers contribute to healthy schools.

Academic achievement and issues of teaching and learning must be the focus of parent leaders.

What does the Commonwealth Institute offer that might be helpful to you?

The Prichard Committee provides technical assistance throughout Kentucky and on a national level. The group models a range of supports and structured opportunities for engaging citizens in school reform, developed over almost twenty years of statewide education reform. Its work crosses a range of economically and racially diverse urban, rural, and suburban communities, and helps further understanding about the importance of context and strategy. The Commonwealth Institute provides tools for *engagement* such as "Parents, Teachers Talking Together," a model of structured conversations between parents and teachers which can be used to consider shared concerns and actions. The organization also maintains an active website for parents and publishes *The Parent Leader*, a monthly newsletter for Institute participants.

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Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform
(Chicago, Illinois)

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (Cross City) was founded in 1993 as a national network of urban school reform leaders working together to improve public schools and education for urban students. Parents are an integral part of all areas of the organization's work, but Cross City works most intensively with parents in its Schools and Community program area.

Background:

- Cross City was formed during a time of dramatic school reform in Chicago, during which the introduction of local school councils gave communities and parents more power and new roles in reform.
- Cross City has its national headquarters in Chicago, with local chapters in Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle. The organization works in other cities as well.
- Cross City works with parents, community members, teachers, principals, central office administrators, researchers, union officials, and funders.
- Number of staff in Schools and Community program area: 2
- Percentage of Cross City's annual budget dedicated to parent/community involvement: Approximately 40%

Cross City's major activities include:

Bringing together diverse groups of school reform leaders nationally across four program areas: Accountability, Site-Based Management and School-Based Budgeting, Teaching and Learning (with focuses on standards and small schools), and Schools and Community.

Building relationships among various stakeholders working inside and outside of schools and school systems.

Coordinating cross-site visits, during which school reform leaders in different cities can learn from each other's efforts.

Convening national working meetings where people gather to work on furthering their efforts at reform.

Supporting the work of local efforts to reform schools and school systems.

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What is Cross City's goal in working with parents?

For too long, in too many urban school districts, parents and community members have been shut out of the educational process. We believe organized and informed parents and community members must have a meaningful role in making decisions at their schools.

From Cross City's website

Cross City's primary goal in its work with parents is to help parents attain an influential role in local and national school reform movements. Some of the ways it works toward this goal are:

Providing training and other forms of technical assistance for parents and other community members about effective ways to bring about school change.

Connecting parents and communities to people with similar interests nationally.

Ensuring that attention is paid to parents' voices within school reform efforts.

What does Cross City's work with parents look like?

My involvement with Cross City has meant a lot. They've given me another level of experience that I can use in the organizing I do. As a parent, it's given me an opportunity to meet and talk with other parents that have the same fights that we do. It's given me a network to connect to other organizers and organizations that do the same kind of work we do. It's just been great.

Parent organizer active in Cross City

Cross City's work with parents is focused on connecting concerned and active parents and community members nationally, as well as helping them to develop the skills necessary to organize for school reform locally. Cross City engages parents through conferences, working meetings, inter-group trainings, site visits, and phone consultations. The organization also offers a three-day "Train the Trainers" curriculum that uses hands-on activities to teach parents and community members who are active or interested in school reform how to train others for effective involvement in improving schools. In 1999, Cross City initiated *The Indicators Project*, which has two prongs: through a partnership with Research for Action, to document and establish ways of measuring the contribution that community organizing groups are making to schools and communities, and to provide opportunities for organizers and parent leaders nationwide to share their experiences and learn from each other. Through their work with parents, community members and community organizing groups, Cross City has developed a growing national network of people engaged in education organizing. Their work has also helped to deepen individual parents' and community members' understanding of the issues and the strategies they need to employ to bring about school change and improve student achievement.

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What assumptions guide Cross City's work with parents?

The way you're going to get meaningful parent involvement is through community organizing, through mobilizing significant bases of informed parents, community members, and educators. ...You've got to use this inside/outside approach to achieve meaningful accountability systems.

National staff member

This staff member's comments touch on several of Cross City's guiding beliefs, including the ideas that:

Change must happen from the bottom-up. Local communities, not national policy, can have the most meaningful impact on school reform.

A cross-sectoral approach to reform is essential. The push for school reform must come from people both internal and external to schools and school systems.

Relationship building is a key strategy. Reform efforts require strong relationships among diverse groups, from parents to superintendents and union representatives to funders.

Reform work must build the capacities of parents and community members. People need support in accessing information and skills to be successful, including opportunities to learn from others engaged in similar efforts.

What does Cross City offer that might be helpful to you?

Cross City provides technical assistance in a range of ways, some more formal than others. At an informal level, the national staff does phone consultations in which they share information about what is happening in other places or help connect people to others in the network. Some of the more formal kinds of technical assistance include:

Trainings designed to build the capacity of local parent and community leaders.

Site visits that allow parents and community members to see first-hand how other communities are approaching issues of school reform.

Working meetings that bring together diverse stakeholders in intentionally small conferences designed for furthering the participants' school reform efforts.

Publications and research covering a wide range of topics including school governance, small schools, policies such as standards, building partnerships between schools and communities, and evidence of the contribution community organizing is making to school reform.

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The Education Trust
(Washington, D.C.)

The Education Trust (Ed Trust) was established in 1990 as a policy organization that is committed to working with educators, parents, and community members in its efforts to close the achievement gap between low-income students and students of color from other students. The Ed Trust believes its involvement with parents and community members helps to balance and inform its policy work.

Background:

- The Ed Trust was established in 1990 as a project under the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). It became an independent non-profit organization in 1997.
- The organization's work ranges "from the classroom to the Congress" and addresses kindergarten to post-secondary schooling.
- The Ed Trust works with teachers, principals, central office administrators, researchers, politicians, parents and community members in urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- Number of staff working directly with families/community: 2-3
- Percentage of the Ed Trust's annual budget dedicated to parent/community involvement: 5%

The Ed Trust's major activities include:

Advocating for policy change at the national, state and local levels.

Working with schools and school districts to help them implement standards-driven reform.

Providing leadership training for administrators, teachers, parents, and community members.

Collecting data and reporting it to the public.

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What is the Ed Trust's goal in working with parents?

Parents and communities are crucial players in making sure their schools work for their young people. The Education Trust works with parents and community-based organizations to become advocates for high standards for all students.

From the Ed Trust's website

The Ed Trust's work with parents and communities is driven by its mission to educate parents about *standards* (expectations of what students should learn in school). The organization believes that when parents are informed about standards, they will be able to advocate more effectively for the implementation of standards in schools. Educating parents is part of the Ed Trust's larger strategy to provide support for local, state, and federal policies that promote educational standards.

What does the Ed Trust's work with parents look like?

The Ed Trust's work with parents and community is varied. It includes: one-time trainings in which parents analyze standards and *assessments* in order to understand what should be taught in schools; *data* presentations that challenge assumptions about why the achievement gap exists; speaking engagements; training sessions conducted over several months; and on-going support. In their work with parents and community members, the Ed Trust has successfully used a training program called "Standards in Practice," which they developed originally for educators.

One example of the Ed Trust's activity with parents is their recent work with a group of parents in Mississippi. Mississippi was just beginning to implement state standards, which were still new to the majority of parents and community members. A non-profit community group that was already working with parents contacted Ed Trust staff and asked them to: develop a training program for a group of 21 parents to help them understand the new Mississippi standards; train those parents to inform other parents and community members about the new standards; and help generate community interest in understanding standards and the accompanying changes that would and should occur in schools.

A staff member from the Ed Trust made two visits to Mississippi, the first to gain a better understanding of the organization and their needs and the second to carry out the actual training over the course of three days. Parents who participated in the training then led over 150 community meetings. Some of the participants also attended the Ed Trust's annual conference in Washington, D.C., a first trip out of Mississippi for some of them. In addition to helping community members learn more about standards, the Ed Trust's work also helped them to gain a greater level of comfort in communicating with people in schools. As one parent remarked, "Now I know their language."

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What assumptions guide the Ed Trust's work with parents?

The Ed Trust's work with parents stems from several key assumptions, including:

When parents and community are educated about standards and know what they should expect from their schools, they generate a "creative tension" that leads to school change.

In order for parents to provide this tension and serve as effective advocates for their children's education, they must be guided by data and policy. Through knowledge of schools' and school systems' performance and knowledge of current educational policies, parents are able to target their advocacy to the most effective places.

What does the Ed Trust offer that might be helpful to you?

The main goal of the Ed Trust's work with parents and community is to help them make sense of standards and assessments so that they can use them for effective and targeted advocacy. At an informal level, the Ed Trust can provide phone consultations in which they direct people or community groups to others who have similar issues. At a more formal level, the organization provides trainings and workshops that are usually focused on teaching parents what standards are, how standards relate to what happens in classrooms, and how standards and classroom practice can be aligned so that student outcomes will improve. These trainings can also educate parents about how to collect, analyze, and report data about student achievement. Finally, the organization convenes an annual national conference, and provides reports and publications on a range of critical educational issues.

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Institute for Education and Social Policy
(New York, New York)

The Institute for Education and Social Policy (the Institute) was established in 1995 to strengthen public education, particularly in low-income communities of color. The Community Involvement Program is a partnership between the Institute and community groups working on the complex issues of reforming public schools. It focuses on building the capacity of neighborhood and community-based organizations to improve public education through parent organizing.

Background:

- The Institute is an independent organization, housed at New York University.
- The organization serves groups and institutions in New York and nationally.
- The Institute supports change at the school and system-wide level.
- Number of staff working directly with families/community: 6
- Percentage of the Institute's annual budget dedicated to parent/community involvement: 33%

The Institute's major activities include:

Providing supports and technical resources aimed at improving and reforming schools to policy makers, educators, parents and community organizations.

Providing research on "hot" issues in education.

Implementing program and project assessments.

Assisting parents and community groups to access, understand, and use data to identify effective solutions and monitor results.

Establishing citywide educational campaigns to push for reform.

Supporting community organizing for school improvement and reform.

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What is the Institute's goal in working with parents?

We are interested in increasing social and political capital—that means supporting organizing campaigns and going after issues—building up the capacity of these neighborhoods so people can achieve what they want in their schools.
Institute Staff

The Institute's work with parents, carried out through the Community Involvement Program, has the goal of developing strong leaders with deep relationships in order to bring about significant improvement of public education in urban low-income communities. To meet this goal, the Institute connects its own policy work, as well as the research of other organizations working on a national level, to action at the neighborhood level. Most of the community groups in the program are already involved in some type of neighborhood or community development efforts and are seeking to broaden that work to include education.

What does the Institute's work with parents look like?

The Institute's community-based work is primarily focused in New York, but also extends to a handful of other major cities. One example of the Institute's approach is their work with New Settlement Apartments (NSA) in New York City. NSA had worked for more than six years in the Southwest Bronx, transforming abandoned buildings into safe and affordable housing, and providing a range of quality services, including an afterschool program, to hundreds of NSA families.

NSA sought assistance from the Institute in response to parents' concerns about their children's progress in reading. The Institute helped NSA to provide support to parents through school performance *data* and workshops focused on parents' rights and responsibilities. The data validated parents' perceptions about their children's low reading skills and galvanized them into action. In dealing with education issues, NSA shifted from a client-service model to a leader-action model, and established a Parent Action Committee. This committee conducted research and outreach to other parents, organized meetings, and convened public forums with elected officials, school board members and members of the board of education. These efforts resulted in significant changes in their targeted schools, including new parent leadership, a bold plan for action, and continued organizing for policies and practices that increase student achievement and educational success.

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WHAT ASSUMPTIONS GUIDE THE INSTITUTE'S WORK WITH PARENTS?

In its work with parents and communities, the Institute believes that:

The Institute should avoid a top-down approach, and should respect the independence of a community to act on its own issues and concerns.

The emphasis should be on supporting leadership capable of organizing for change.

Groups must have the necessary resources to support their actions, including adequate funding, dedicated staff, a permanent structure, and the ability to produce turnout.

Given the turbulence often associated with school change, organization leaders must be risk takers, willing to support parent leaders as they work to undo the status quo.

WHAT DOES THE INSTITUTE OFFER THAT MIGHT BE HELPFUL TO YOU?

The Institute provides a range of resources to support parent and community work in education *reform*. These include: access to research and publications produced by the Institute and others; networking opportunities (connections to local and national groups working on similar issues); and public forums with some of the country's leading practitioners. The specific technical support offered to each community organization is determined through direct interactions with the group and tailored according to its unique needs.

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School Design and Development Center

A Project of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

The School Design and Development Center (SDDC) was created in 1996 with the purpose of providing comprehensive services to individuals and groups for designing and developing charter schools serving low-income students. In 2000, the SDDC initiated the Family Foundations Project to create an active and caring community of adults capable of supporting the needs of individual children and their families and advocating for non-public educational alternatives.

Background:

- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) was established by the Wisconsin Legislature in 1990 to provide low-income Milwaukee families with vouchers to enroll their children in non-religious private schools, and was later expanded to religious private schools. It is the country's oldest voucher initiative.
- In Milwaukee, between 1990 and 2001, the number of schools participating in the Choice Program increased from seven schools serving 341 students to more than 100 schools enrolling an estimated 9,700 students. The SDDC provides a variety of technical supports for existing and emerging charter schools in Milwaukee.
- SDDC is a component of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, an independent group dedicated to supporting vouchers, charters, and other non-public educational options for low- and moderate-income families.
- Number of staff working directly with families/community: 1
- Percentage of SDDC's annual budget dedicated to parent/community involvement: 20%

The SDDC's major activities include:

Helping choice and charter schools to define or refine their school vision and mission.

Developing or strengthening Choice Program schools' strategic plans.

Building the Choice schools' organizational capacity to implement their strategic plans.

Providing direct services and supports such as: grant and proposal writing assistance; access to teacher and administrator mentors and consultants; access to a network of human resources through contacts with business, higher education, community organizations and others; and information about educational research and best practices.

Developing initiatives to support family and community in charter schools.

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What is the School Design and Development Center's goal in working with parents?

This program really also helped me identify where my passion is—helping people and educating people.
Family Foundations Parent

Through its Family Foundations Project, SDDC works with parents who have children in Milwaukee's *choice* and charter programs to:

Increase the quality and frequency of interactions within and among families.

Promote increased teamwork and shared responsibility among participants.

Support parent involvement in the education of their children.

Build on the assets of family and community.

Develop student and parent leadership.

What does the School Design and Development Center's work with parents look like?

The Family Foundations Project is still a very young project, having operated for little more than one full year. During this year, SDDC has developed a partnership with two other quite different groups (New Concept Self Development, a community social service organization, and High Winds, a rural environmental agency) to pool resources for the project. Ten out of eleven targeted families have participated consistently in their pilot program and have increased their involvement in school and community activities, including participation in school governance and organizing a neighborhood block event. SDDC sees parents taking increasing ownership of the project and a greater role in setting priorities and directions for project activities.

The project has also helped parents in their personal lives. Several participants have sought and gained employment, and one parent applied to college and was successful in securing a scholarship. Parents also report that their conversations with other parents have influenced their vision of a good school and led to a more thoughtful selection of schools for their children.

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What assumptions guide the School Design and Development Center's work with parents?

SDDC's work with families is guided by a set of basic beliefs. These include the conviction that:

A caring community of adults that can both advocate for and support school choice is an essential element in productive communities.

The quality and frequency of interactions within and across families is currently too limited; through planned group activities, parents and children will learn to socialize and appreciate one another and become strengthened families.

The social and cultural traditions of families and community should be recognized as assets to support children and student achievement.

Regular and ongoing social interactions among parents contribute to the development of a more cohesive and nurturing community for children.

Parents as leaders are a potential community asset; parents can serve as powerful mentors to other parents.

What does the School Design and Development Center offer that might be helpful to you?

The SDDC's direct work with parents is still in a very early stage of development. The broader program can share how parents are involved in choice and charter schools, particularly in the newly established private schools operated by community organizations. Similarly, this work offers an opportunity to learn about a new collaboration among diverse community groups such as a social service and environmental groups, and how this joint effort helps families. The Institute for the Transformation of Learning, of which SDDC is a part, also publishes reports and information about Choice schools, and maintains a website.

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Examining the images of the seven groups' involvement with parents reveals a number of practical ideas about the opportunities for and barriers to involving parents in schools and school *reform*. Some of the lessons include:

Opportunities for Parent Engagement

LESSON ONE

Community development work and school reform are interconnected.

LESSON TWO

Building quality relationships between parents and educators is crucial to building trust.

LESSON THREE

In order for parents to take on new roles in school reform, it is essential to build their capacity as education leaders.

LESSON FOUR

Profound change happens in schools when parents become leaders in their school and community.

LESSON FIVE

The use of school data, including student achievement data, can be a strategy to uncover what is happening and what needs to change.

LESSON SIX

Changes in school districts, such as standards and shared decision-making, provide leverage for parents to make changes.

LESSON SEVEN

Statewide policies create opportunities for galvanizing parents and community.

Barriers to Parent Engagement

LESSON ONE

State and local mandates can also discourage parent involvement.

LESSON TWO

The complexity of school change can result in scattered energies and waste limited resources.

LESSON THREE

Parents are rarely viewed as leaders and change agents in their schools.

LESSON FOUR

There are no quick fixes!

In this section we discuss each of these lessons and offer specific examples of how the seven groups have taken advantage of opportunities, as well as run into barriers and overcome them. While each of the lessons in this section could be illustrated by the work of many or all of the groups, we present illustrative examples for each lesson from only some of the groups.

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Opportunities for Engaging Parents in School Life and School Reform

LESSON ONE: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORK AND SCHOOL REFORM ARE INTERCONNECTED.

Everything has to start with the community, whether in the schools or in the community-based education. Together, we are deciding to build something for our community.

Parent Leader at Cross City meeting

The **Alliance Schools, Institute for Education and Social Policy**, and the **Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform** all share a commitment to strengthening the community, and see healthy schools as an element of that work. Trainings and other supports that help parents to develop their knowledge and confidence to address quality of life issues in their communities can also be used to improve schools. This work builds a constituency interested in both a stronger community and improving public education.

Concerns about children's safety traveling to and from school prompted some local **Cross City** parents and teachers to band together to secure crossing guards for targeted high traffic and unprotected corners. Parents met with local government officials and testified at City Council. Healthcare services for children became an issue when IAF leaders found a connection between low reading levels and the lack of eye examinations and glasses for low-income students. These examples help illuminate the intrinsic linkages between school and community life.

LESSON TWO: BUILDING QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND EDUCATORS IS CRUCIAL TO BUILDING TRUST.

Education research accepts that parents, both individually and as a group, can play an important role in improving their children's education. This is particularly true in the case of low-income communities and communities of color, where studies have documented the measurable academic gains resulting from partnerships between parents and schools.[5] Many groups have found that establishing new relationships between parents and teachers—based on shared interests and common goals—is a critical first step. **Alliance Schools** leaders and organizers conduct hundreds of individual meetings with parents and teachers (what they call *one-on-ones*) as a strategy to build these relationships. They see this as one of the most important aspects of their organizing.

LESSON THREE: IN ORDER FOR PARENTS TO TAKE ON NEW ROLES IN SCHOOL REFORM, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO BUILD THEIR CAPACITY AS EDUCATION LEADERS.

Even though many of the parents completing the **Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership** training had prior experiences as volunteers in their schools and community, they have said that their training made them feel more capable, confident, and compelled to raise issues with other parents, teachers and administrators, and push for change.

[5] *Berla, N., & Henderson, A.T. (1997). A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Education.*

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LESSON FOUR: PROFOUND CHANGE HAPPENS IN SCHOOLS WHEN PARENTS BECOME LEADERS IN THEIR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY.

When one group of parents went to the **Institute for Education and Social Policy** about their school's poor reading scores, they ended up examining the big picture of school management and *accountability*. This work led parents to conclude that a stronger and more responsive school leadership was needed. The parents successfully organized to remove the principal and get a new one. Through **Cross City's** Indicators Project, parent leaders, emboldened by site visits to other community groups and schools, are asking hard questions of themselves and their schools. Parents in one city are co-sponsoring dialogues between parents and representatives of the teachers union. In another city, parents are fighting for increased and improved professional development for the teachers in their schools.

STOP & THINK

EFFECTIVE PROJECTS ALWAYS CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO.

BAND-AID SOLUTIONS CANNOT ADDRESS THE SERIOUS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES CONFRONTING PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC. WHEN ORGANIZATIONS PUSH FOR DEEPER CHANGES, THEY RUN THE RISK OF HAVING SCHOOLS WITHDRAW SUPPORT OR LIMIT ACCESS INSIDE SCHOOLS.

LESSON FIVE: THE USE OF SCHOOL DATA, INCLUDING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT DATA, CAN BE A STRATEGY TO UNCOVER WHAT IS HAPPENING AND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE.

We start by helping [parents] to look at their standards, look at the achievement, collecting data, trying to figure out what they already knew and had already done, and we'd go through a data workshop with them and develop a plan with them, which may involve continuing work with us, or working with another group, or organizing around certain issues.

Education Trust Staff Member

Almost all of the groups in this study use *data* in their work with parent leaders. **The Achievement Council** promoted the use of data through support for the writing and publication of *Setting Our Sights: Measuring Equity in School Change.*[6] **The Achievement Council** later operationalized the strategies in the publication through its work with the Equity Network, a grassroots multi-ethnic coalition of parents and community members. Coalition members used school and system-wide data, for example, to analyze their schools' course offerings, student participation in advanced placement courses, and the availability of resources like libraries. The **Institute for Education and Social Policy** also uses achievement data in its work with parents and community, helping them to create a culture of inquiry, problem solving, and action.

In the meantime, school districts have also begun to use data more openly to make the case for the need for *reform* and to defend the success of their reform agendas.

6 *Johnson, R. S. (1996). Setting our sights: Measuring equity in school change. California: Quality Education For All.*

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LESSON SIX: CHANGES IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS, SUCH AS STANDARDS AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING, PROVIDE LEVERAGE FOR PARENTS TO MAKE CHANGES.

During the 1990s, *standards* that defined what students should know and be able to do in math, English, science, and other subjects were developed and adopted in almost every school district in the country. These standards, often coupled with new *assessments* and an *accountability* system, contributed to a charged school environment that drew parents into school life. The **Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform** published a Standards Tool Kit to help parents and educators better understand standards and the implications for students, teachers, parents and community. The **Education Trust** trains parents on how to examine homework assignments and other student work to see if the school curriculum and instruction helps students meet standards.

A movement towards *shared decision-making* (involving parents in the management of schools) in some districts is another change that has created openings for parent *engagement*. With the establishment of local school councils in the late 1980s, Chicago led the recent movement for shared governance that includes parents and schools. The **Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership** and **Cross City Campaign's** "Train the Trainers" curriculum support parents and community members who serve as decision makers in their schools.

LESSON SEVEN: STATEWIDE POLICIES CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GALVANIZING PARENTS AND COMMUNITY.

While changes at the school or district level—like shared decision-making and standards—create opportunities for parents to enter into school life, state-level policies also provide a means to influence many schools. For example, when the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) became law in 1990, the state was considered to have one of the weakest educational systems in the nation. KERA provided the impetus for the formation of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, which developed the **Commonwealth Institute** to foster parent leadership in school *reform*.

In 1990, the Wisconsin Legislature enacted the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program (MPCP), a tax-supported voucher program for low-income families living in Milwaukee. In response to the rapid increase in the number of children enrolled in *Choice* schools, the **School Development and Design Center** initiated its Family Strengthening Project.

Groups do not have to wait passively for a state to change school policies; they can also demand changes. For example, the organizing work of the **Interfaith Education Fund** influenced Texas lawmakers to create the Capital Investment Fund, a competitive grants program which is a source of millions of additional dollars for schools that meet criteria for parent and community involvement.

Policy initiatives that are perceived as negative can also be an impetus to positive action. In California, the passage of Proposition 209[7] in 1996 was seen by many as an assault on affirmative action and a threat to education and employment opportunities for women and minorities throughout the state. Concerned about what it perceived as the negative consequences of the law, **The Achievement Council** stepped up its direct work with parents in support of more equitable schools.

[7] *Proposition 209 was the 1996 California state law that effectively eliminated affirmative action programs for women and minorities by ending programs run by the state or local governments that give "preferential treatment" on the basis of sex, race, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the areas of public employment, contracting, and education.*

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Barriers that Shut Parents Out of School Life and School Reform

And we say no more. Our children are going to have opportunities we never had. But we have no illusions. It takes our watchful eyes to be sure no one denies our children.

Achievement Council Parent

LESSON ONE: STATE AND LOCAL MANDATES CAN ALSO DISCOURAGE PARENT INVOLVEMENT.

While new laws, often enacted at the state level, have resulted in bold plans for reforming schools, the implementation of these plans rarely supports meaningful parent and community involvement for several reasons.

For starters, *mandated reforms* are top-down. Few educators and even fewer parents have opportunities to participate in creating a shared vision and deciding how to act on that vision. As a result, there is often little buy-in and ownership on the part of educators and parents for the proposed changes.

Secondly, top-down reform agendas tend to be short-lived when there is turnover at the top. With the average tenure of urban superintendents spanning less than three years,[8] shifting agendas and priorities undermine attempts to build community involvement as a lever for change at the district level.

Thirdly, many school professionals are either indifferent or opposed to new reform agendas. Parents attempting to use *standards* or school governance as levers to improve schools should expect at some point to meet strong resistance from what one observer calls the "battle worn veterans of past educational reform campaigns."[9]

These kinds of complexities can be an obstacle to parent *engagement* in reform and underscore the need for an approach that works to avoid seismic shifts in leadership and agendas. For example, **Alliance Schools** leaders and staff organize both top-down (impacting policy) and bottom-up (working directly at the community and local school level), and only in schools where the principal accepts the **Alliance Schools** philosophy.

LESSON TWO: THE COMPLEXITY OF SCHOOL CHANGE CAN RESULT IN SCATTERED ENERGIES AND WASTE LIMITED RESOURCES.

Turning around failing schools is complex work involving many parts of the education system. Staff organizers and parent leaders must carefully consider how to use their limited resources. Efforts to engage at the school level through parent-run afterschool programs, for example, must be highly strategic to ensure that parents don't spend countless hours planning and operating a program that has little positive impact on school culture or *teaching and learning*.

The kinds of work described in this Guide require thoughtful planning, access to information, time, and hands-on support from dedicated staff. The **Institute for Education and Social Policy** and the **Education Trust** require groups to have an organizer on staff to work directly and regularly with parents.

[8] *Council of the Great City Schools. (March, 2000). Second biennial survey. Introduction and Survey Methodology. Washington, D.C.: Council of the Great City Schools.*

[9] *Elmore, Richard F. (2000). Building a new structure for school leadership. Washington, D.C.: The Albert Shanker Institute.*

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LESSON THREE: PARENTS ARE RARELY VIEWED AS LEADERS AND CHANGE AGENTS IN THEIR SCHOOLS.

Most of the work profiled in this Guide seeks to support parents as leaders and change agents in their schools and community. Parents often describe what they perceive as educators' resistance to partnering with parents. When it comes to academic achievement, the culture of blame and finger pointing in schools—parents blame teachers, teachers blame parents, schools blame community, etc.—creates a barrier to parent *engagement* in the schools.

This report shows some of the ways that organizations outside schools can help parents develop the necessary skills and power to collaborate effectively with schools. In Texas, **Alliance Schools** leaders include both parents and educators, and have been empowered and sustained for more than 25 years through the organizing work of the Industrial Areas Foundation. The **Cross City Campaign** arranges meetings that take parents and educators away to different cities and settings, offering a safe place for more open discussion of issues deemed too difficult or risky to confront at home. The **Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership** develops regional networks of support for parent-driven projects at the local school level. Over time, the aggregate impact of these projects increases the acceptance and appreciation for strong parent leadership and partnerships.

LESSON FOUR: THERE ARE NO QUICK FIXES!

Its benefits [trust and collaboration between schools and community] are seldom immediate and usually only visible to the faithful.

Community Leader at a Cross City meeting

If parents and teachers are to engage in partnerships that lead to improving education, both the complexity of this work and the serious commitment of time must be appreciated. Several of the organizations featured in this study are engaged in analyzing the processes of organizing for school *reform* and bringing this information into public awareness.

Both the **Cross City Campaign** and the **Institute for Education and Social Policy** have carried out research on how organizations work with schools and communities to help them bring about school change, and the intricacies of this work. The **Cross City Campaign's** *Indicators Project* is a framework that helps to make important education organizing strategies and outcomes—like establishing trust between different stakeholder groups—visible to broader audiences. The **Institute for Education and Social Policy's** study, *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement*, identifies organizations that are helping parents and community groups to mobilize around school reform issues.

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Helping Parents Sit at the Table

[Before training] I felt like I was always running into walls. It's easy to sell candy bars. It takes a lot of training to do other things.

Parent reflecting on her
Commonwealth Institute for Parent
Leadership experiences

The groups included in this Guide provide technical assistance (TA) designed to engage parents, educators and other citizens in significantly improving public education. The Southwest Regional Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) describes his organization's work in this area as, "Helping thousands of ordinary people define their own interest and collectively act for the common good."

As providers of technical support, these groups help parents engage as partners in the multifaceted world of schools and school reform. The work is targeted; it might involve an individual school, a cluster of schools, a local school system, or in some cases, an entire state system of education. Regardless of the level of change, the goal is to help parents and others develop shared knowledge and skills, grow confident, and form powerful human and institutional networks capable of improving schools and communities. Although the scope and scale of assistance varies, the approach used by the seven groups can generally be described as building local capacity, or "organizing communities of action, facilitating connections to power, and providing the tools and skills for inventing effective strategies for change."[10]

Typically the support these organizations provide has helped parents and others to:

Establish new ways of promoting conversations among parents and between parents and schools.

Participate in conferences and other kinds of formal trainings.

Understand and use best practices.

Gain first-hand knowledge through site visits.

Study and understand the underlying issues.

Help an organization build on its assets.

The rest of this section explores these aspects of technical assistance in greater depth, using images from the work of the seven groups. As you read about the kinds of technical assistance that exist, you may want to consider how these seven groups could help your own efforts to engage parents in school life and school reform. At the end of the section are two tools that can help you to identify the technical assistance provider that best meets your needs: a chart outlining the specific kinds of technical assistance that each group offers (p.38), and a list of questions that are important to ask about your local context in order to identify what kind(s) of technical assistance will help you most (pp.39-41).

[10] *Cahill, M., Fruchter, N., & Wahl, E. (1998) Building capacity: A review of technical assistance strategies. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy.*

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Establish new ways of promoting conversations among parents and between parents and schools.

Through the **Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership**, parents learn how to organize what they call PT3 meetings—Parents, Teachers Talking Together—to increase parent involvement and improve parent-teacher collaborations. Over the course of two days, small groups of parents and teachers (and sometimes students) first meet separately to identify their concerns and then join together to identify shared concerns and develop a plan for collective action.

The **School Design and Development Center**'s Family Strengthening Project organizes weekend overnight activities for parents and their children. These events are designed to promote increased interactions within and among families through a variety of social and recreational activities. The project also arranges weekend retreats with activities such as chat groups for men and women, moonlight hikes, arts and crafts projects, collaborative tasks such as meal preparation, and time for reflection.

Participate in conferences and other kinds of formal trainings.

Cross City developed a "Train the Trainers" curriculum, through which they provide formal training for parent groups to support more effective organizing. The **Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership** holds a residential six-day training in seven regions throughout Kentucky for approximately two hundred parents each year. The **Commonwealth Institute** also provides Community Support Coordinators, who mentor and coach parents for a year-long period to support the design and implementation of parent-led projects aimed at increasing parent-school collaboration and improving student achievement.

Working meetings or conferences provide another form of training. The **Education Trust** convenes a large national conference each fall. **Cross City** provides somewhat smaller conferences with fewer than 100 participants (known as "working meetings") that focus on specific topics, such as restructuring high schools or *accountability*. These gatherings are designed to allow ample time for learning and sharing from experts in the field, as well as parents and educators. Since the **Alliance Schools** are institutional members of the Southwest Texas IAF and the even larger national IAF organizing network, **Alliance Schools** leaders have access to a range of formal trainings including a rigorous national ten-day organizing training and special trainings for Alliance Schools principals and teachers.

STOP & THINK

All training should be part of a larger plan.

Groups have to be thoughtful about how they use training to build their work. Without a clear plan, trainings will probably have little impact on school culture, practices, or policies.

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Understand and use best practices.

While formal trainings and conferences are an important source of support, parents can also find many learning opportunities while working with a technical assistance provider. In working closely with groups, technical assistance providers share their knowledge of *best practices* (proven methods of improving schools and student achievement).

Some providers use their knowledge of community organizing to help groups. For example, they have supported groups in using "the *relational approach*," a key idea of organizing that fosters interpersonal relationships to help people find common interests and act together toward shared goals. Using this idea, the **Institute for Education and Social Policy** facilitates parent discussions about their values and beliefs in order to develop a formal group agreement or pledge, and the **Commonwealth Institute** supports small regional meetings where the unique needs of an area may be directly addressed. Another example of this work is the **Alliance Schools'** neighborhood walks, during which educators, parents and other community members go door-to-door to learn what the community thinks about its schools.

The use of *data* and research is another "best practice" for community *engagement* in school reform. Technical assistance groups use this practice to help parents ask good questions about specific issues and identify possible solutions. The **Education Trust** and **The Achievement Council** use data to help parents better understand *equity* issues. This work builds parents' confidence and ability to raise equity and other issues with their schools. Organizers use a variety of data—including research reports, articles, and school district statistics—to access information that they can share with parents and communities.

Gain first-hand knowledge through site visits.

Several of the groups in this study, including the **Institute for Education and Social Policy** and the **Commonwealth Institute**, facilitate school and community site visits for first-hand observations of exemplary work. These visits to observe ongoing activities—a meeting, school event, or debriefing session—provide opportunities for learning in context. Concepts, such as establishing relationships as the underpinning of organizing or the need to learn negotiating skills and compromise, often become clearer through a site visit that includes time for observation and discussion with other parents, teachers, school administrators, students, and community members. Similar to conferences, these visits are most useful when they are strategically used as part of an overall action plan.

What TA Groups Can and Cannot Do

Can help facilitate conversations, but can't tell you what to say.

Can help you problem solve, but can't give you the answers.

Can share successful strategies for increasing turnout, but can't go out and bring people to your event.

Can help with vision setting, but can't create commitment.

Can help you find pertinent information, but can't do your research.

Can help you plan, but won't give a program.

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Study and understand the underlying issues.

A number of the seven groups featured in this Guide conduct and publish research, and can provide access to a wealth of studies and current information coming from the field of education.

The **Education Trust** and **Cross City** both regularly publish reports of interest to a national audience. The **Institute for Education and Social Policy** and the **Prichard Committee** also produce studies, although the **Prichard Committee** is more focused on Kentucky education issues and the **Institute for Education and Social Policy** uses New York as a lens for much, but not all, of its research.

A number of these organizations have affiliations with universities or research entities. The **Alliance Schools** draws on the research and policy arm of their parent organization, the **Interfaith Education Fund**. The **Institute for Education and Social Policy** draws on its connections with New York University, and the **School Development and Design Center** receives research support from the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University.

In addition, nearly all the groups in this study maintain websites that include valuable *data* and background information. (See Contact Information (p.42) and Chart on Technical Assistance (p.38) for addresses.)

Help an organization build on its assets.

Organizers tell us that technical assistance most often begins with a telephone conversation between the group and the potential technical assistance providers. These talks focus on the group's identity, needs, accomplishments and the political environment surrounding schools in the area. The technical assistance providers help groups to think about their organizational values and beliefs, and to identify their organizational assets. These important stories about a group's history, relationships, interests, opportunities and capacity are the building blocks for technical support and future work to engage parents in school *reform*.

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Snapshot of Technical Supports Groups Can Offer

	Publications	Research	Phone Consultations	On-site Consultations	Networking Opportunities	Trainings	Conferences	Active Website	Hosting Site Visits
The Achievement Council Los Angeles, CA Joyce Germaine Watts (213) 487-3194 www.achievementcouncil.org	★	★						★	
Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform Chicago, IL Chris Brown and Lupe Prieto (312) 322-4880 www.crosscity.org	★	★	★		★	★	★	★	★
The Education Trust Washington, D.C. Stephanie Robinson (202) 293-1217 www.edtrust.org	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	
Institute for Education and Social Policy New York, NY Richard Gray, Jr. (212) 998-5880 www.nyu.edu/iesp	★	★	★	★	★	★		★	
Interfaith Education Fund Austin, TX Carol Fenimore (512) 459-6551	★	★	★						★
Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence Lexington, KY Robert P. Sexton (859) 233-9849 www.prichardcommittee.org	★		★					★	★
School Design and Development Center Milwaukee, WI Robert Pavlik Zakiya Courtney (414) 288-3886 (Bob) (414) 288-3054(Zakiya) www.itlmuonline.org	★	★						★	

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Taking Stock: Important Questions to Consider Before Seeking Technical Assistance

Having read about other organizations' efforts to engage parents in school *reform* as well as the kinds of technical assistance that these groups offer, take some time to reflect on your own local context. Below are some questions that you may want to consider about your circumstances in order to choose the best technical assistance provider(s) for your needs, and to make the best use of your technical assistance once you secure it. Take time to think hard about these questions and take note of your reflections.

What are your organizational beliefs and values?

What are your core beliefs about the role of parents and community members in school reform?

Are you prepared to provide the resources needed to do this work, including political capital?

How compatible are your organization's beliefs, values and goals with those of organizations from whom you might request technical assistance?

Where are you now in your work and what might help you move forward?

Do you have relationships inside schools and/or the school system? What is the nature of these relationships?

What kinds of past organizational and personal experiences does your group have with schools and the school system?

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WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH?

What schools do your constituents attend? What is happening in those schools?

Are members of your group/community satisfied with your schools? What do they like? What are their concerns?

If you are interested in working to improve your schools, have you clarified your overall goals and the outcomes you hope to achieve?

What is prompting you to contact an organization that offers technical assistance? Do you know what kinds of help you need?

How well do you understand the work of a given technical assistance provider, and the kinds of assistance they can offer?

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST WITHIN YOUR LOCAL CONTEXT? WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, SCHOOL DISTRICT, AND STATE?

What are the biggest problems facing your schools?

What are your schools doing to improve? Is there a reform agenda? If so, what is it?

How well have reform efforts succeeded so far?

Is there a formal role for parents/community in your schools?

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What kinds of changes are happening in your local environment?

What are barriers to improving your schools?

In your city, who has the power to change schools?

WHAT ARE YOUR STARTING POINTS FOR CREATING CHANGE?

Are there resources available for work with schools?

What are those resources and how do you secure them? Within your group/coalition, who is interested or involved in school work?

Do your schools share data with the public? If so, what does the data show? What else would you like to know?

notes:

The Achievement Council
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3460 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 420
Los Angeles, CA 90010
Phone: 213-487-3194
Fax: 213-487-1879
www.achievementcouncil.org

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform
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www.crosscity.org

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Interfaith Education Fund
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Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
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School Design and Development Center
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accountability - looking at results to see if the stated goals or expectations have been met.

assessment – an examination or process that measures levels of knowledge or skills in areas like math, reading, and science.

best practices - using a strategy that research shows improves or has promise of improving student achievement. Also referred to as promising practices.

choice – typically refers to creating educational vouchers that can be used at private and parochial schools, but also includes a range of other schools such as charter schools, contract schools, and for-profit management of public schools.

constituency for public education – individuals, including parents and other citizens, who value public education, feel ownership, and are willing to act together on its behalf.

data – a variety of information that tells what happens in schools; may include statistics on student attendance and promotion rates, levels of teacher certification in selected schools, or student performance on standardized tests. Student work is another form of data and can tell a story about what is being taught and learned in a particular classroom or school.

engagement – ideally, a level of parent and community involvement in an individual school or system of schools that leads to changes and school improvement.

equity – educational equity means that resources are used to address the disparities of opportunity for children of different backgrounds (income, race and ethnicity, language, etc.) and to support an equal chance to learn.

mandate – to require, demand.

one-on-one – brief conversation intended to help individuals relate to one another; a basic organizing strategy consisting of sharing and getting information about life experiences, background, concerns, and interests; the basis of a relational approach (listed below). Also referred to as individual meetings.

political capital – the power to influence specific decision-makers to change something, such as policy, funding, or practice, in order to improve an outcome.

reform – to make important changes in the way schools operate in order to significantly improve student achievement. Reform changes school policies (at district, state, and national levels) that direct or guide a school system, as well as practices such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, and organization. Related terms: school change, transformation, systemic reform, systems change.

relational approach – a community organizing technique that places an emphasis on interpersonal relationships through which individuals can act out of their shared understanding and interests.

shared decision-making - a bottom-up approach to school governance, which commonly includes teachers, parents, principals, and in some cases high school students. Also referred to as shared governance.

standards – stated expectations about what students should know and be able to do in subjects like math, English and science. Related terms: content standards, academic standards.

teaching and learning – an approach that pays as much attention to successful outcomes ("Did the student learn?") as inputs ("I taught it").

turnout – in community organizing, getting people to a meeting or event. Often refers to a level of participation which meets goals.

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AMY RHODES is a researcher at Research for Action. Her work has focused on the relationship between community development and school reform, with an emphasis on parent involvement in schools. She is a co-author of *Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and Their Roles in School Reform During Children Achieving, 1995-2000*, an evaluation of the Annenberg Challenge in Philadelphia. She is also part of an RFA research team that is documenting a community-based organization in Chicago and its organizing around schools and affordable housing. She is on the editorial board of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, a newspaper promoting public engagement in Philadelphia public school reform.

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Research for Action is a Philadelphia-based non-profit organization engaged in education research and reform. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

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